

Beyond Hospital Walls: Two Innovative Programs Help VAPHS Reach Veterans

At VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS), local veterans can receive comprehensive medical treatment without ever stepping foot in a hospital thanks to two innovated programs designed to give patients easier access to care.

VA Pittsburgh's Mobile Geriatric Unit – essentially a primary care office on wheels – is currently in its ninth year and serves inner city veterans who otherwise wouldn't access the VA. The setup is fairly simple: "There is no appointment needed, patients can walk in and be seen," says Dr. Judith Plowman, a primary care physician who directs the program.

Beyond Dr. Plowman, a licensed practical nurse and a driver staff the van, which stops in among three different communities monthly. While many VAs have mobile clinics, "most do not use them to deliver primary care in the community as a primary care clinic," says Dr. Plowman. "As far as we know there is no other program quite like it."

Dr. Plowman also heads VAPHS's home-based primary care program, which provides home-care to some 200 veteran men and women who are unable to travel to the hospital or doctor's office.

This program boasts an extensive team of about 20 medical professionals including nurses, social workers, occupational therapists, dietary support, physical therapists, speech therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists and pharmacists.

During each home visit, Dr. Plowman and her crew use laptop computers to tap into the VA's electronic medical records system to access a patient's complete chart. If necessary, they utilize pulse oximeters and bladder scanners on the road, and they can also order home X-rays, EKGs, Doppler studies and blood draws.

These trips give the medical team important access—a small peek into a veteran's life. "We get to see their house and their medications, and we get to know their family. We get a better sense of what's going on in their home," says Dr. Plowman, who recently received VA Pittsburgh's "Physician of the Year" honors for her work in home-based care.

The intimate setting helps veterans feel more comfortable while enabling the medical team to better tailor their delivery of care. Says Dr. Plowman: "It's a win-win for everyone involved."



Dr. Plowman cares for veteran Nilus Rumble in the VA's Mobile Geriatric Unit.



The VA's Mobile Geriatric Unit waits for patients in the Homewood-Brushton YMCA parking lot.



Dr. Plowman consults her computer before caring for a patient in the VA's Mobile Geriatric Unit.

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